

Return on Investment - Is Virtual Reference Worth the Cost?



Objective

To determine if providing a virtual or digital reference service is cost effective and meets the changing strategic objectives of the library.

Introduction

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Library offered a virtual or digital reference service called 'AskUs Live!' to customers. Service parameters include:

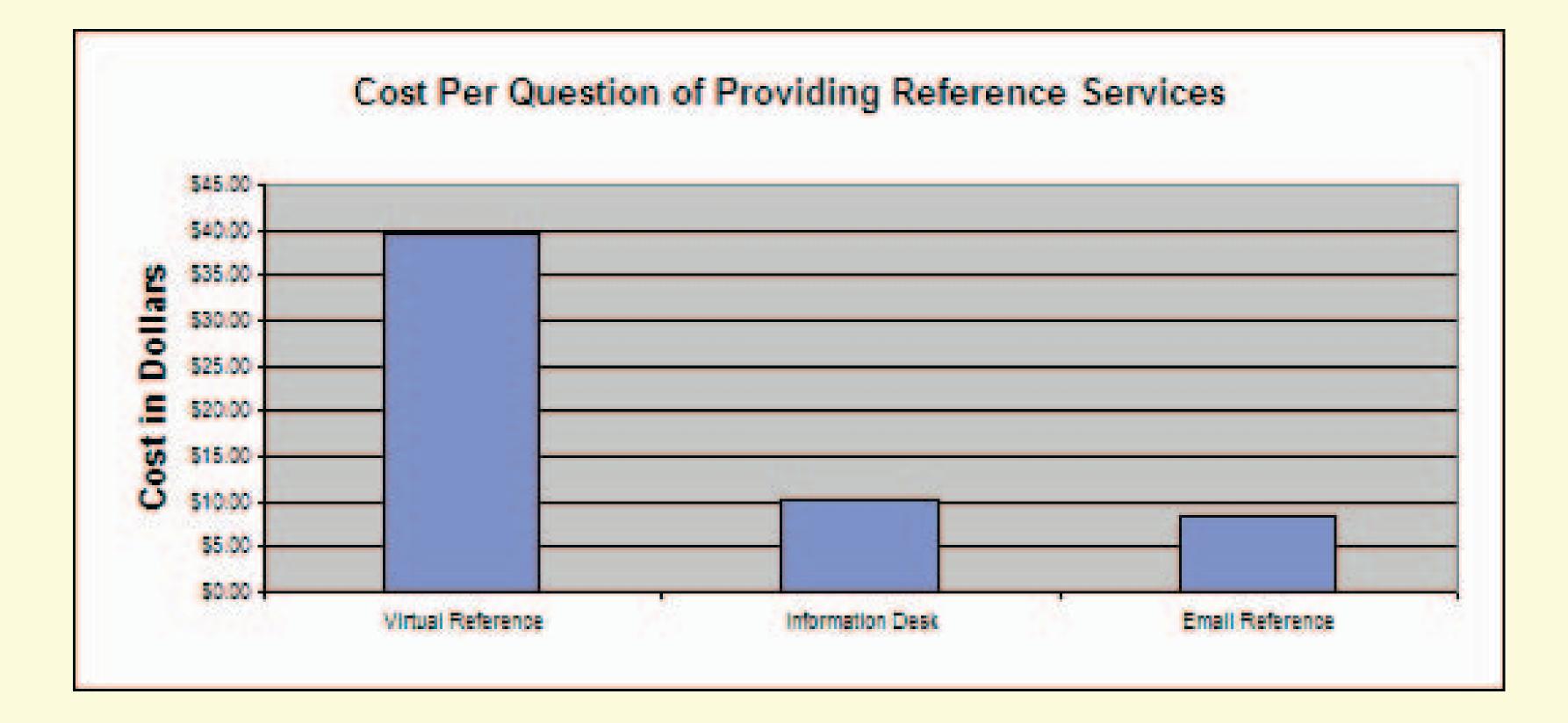
- Service began January 2002
- Operated from 8:30 am to 5:00 pm Monday through Friday
- Primarily served the staff of the NIH and several other U.S. Department of Health and Human Services agencies, but a link to the virtual reference service on the Library's website gave anyone visiting the website access to the reference service
- A link to the AskUs Live! service was placed on every page of the website in February 2004 when the Library switched to content management software

Methods

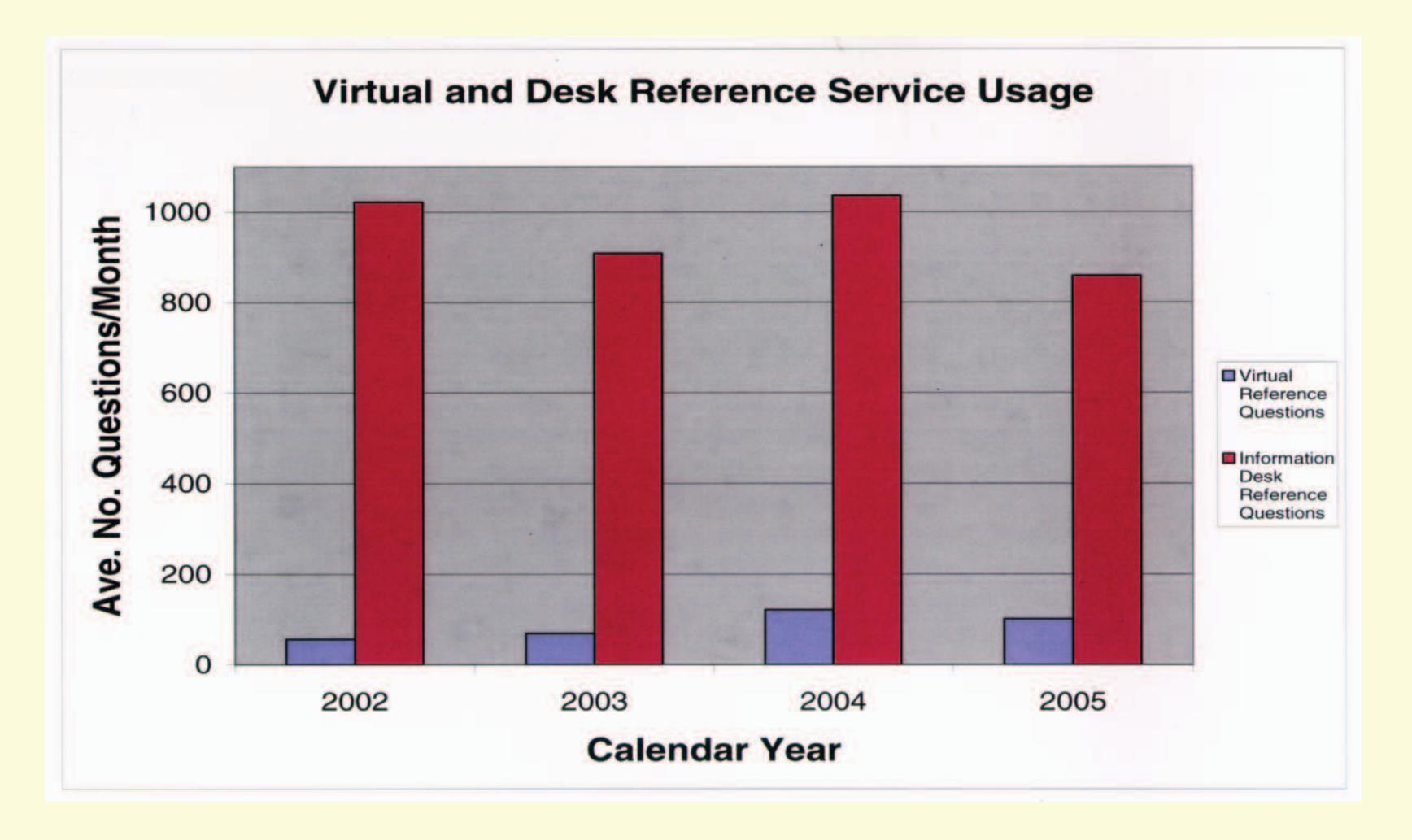
- Compare the cost of providing reference by virtual, email, and desk services
- Analyze trends in usage over the four-year period
- Analyze the results of service evaluation surveys
- Analyze the results of a user-needs survey

Results

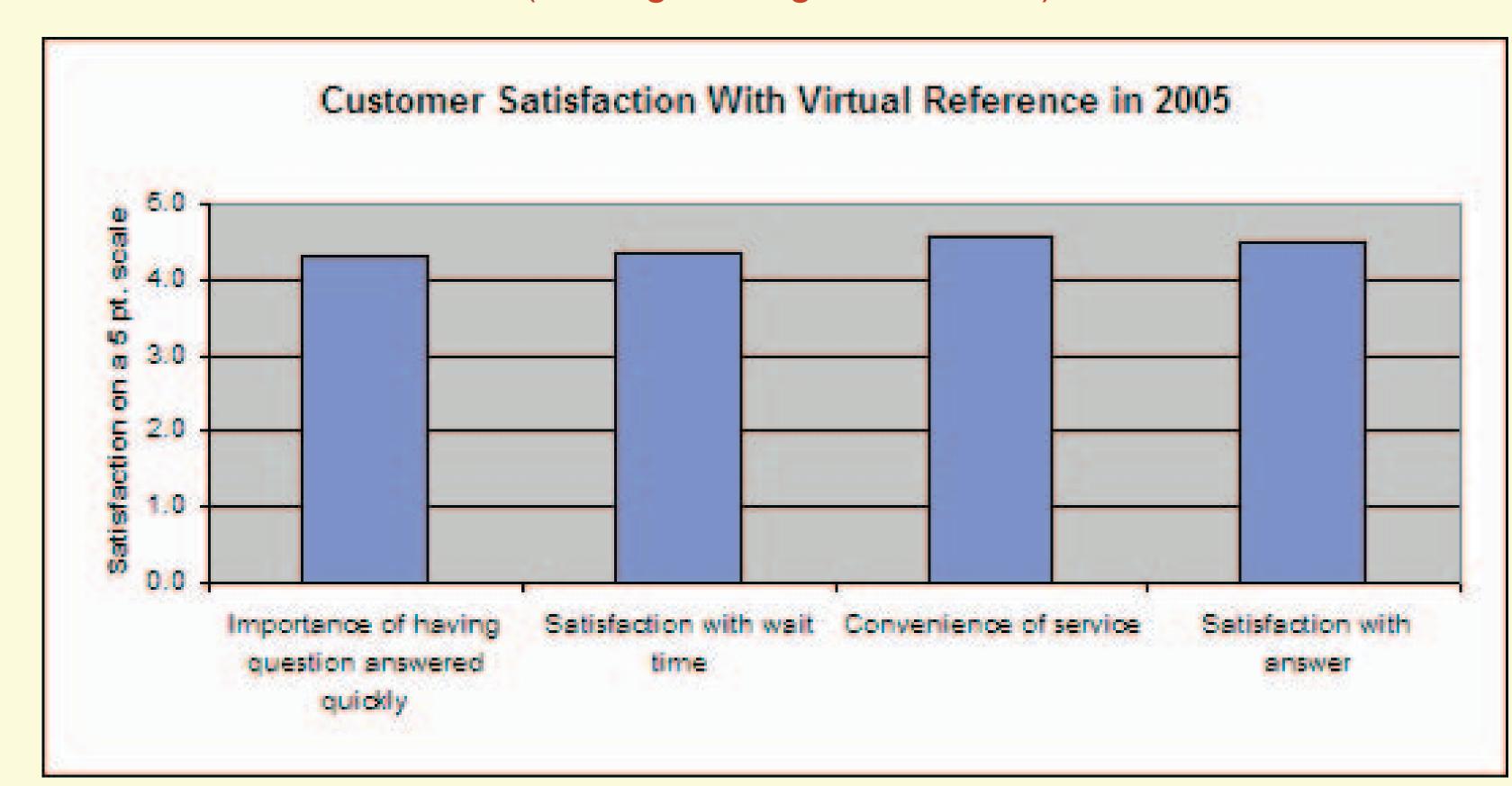
The expense of providing a virtual reference service was determined not to be cost effective. The cost of answering a question using the service was found to be four times that of answering a question at the information desk or by email reference. These costs are based on direct costs and do not include the expense of advertising the virtual reference service.



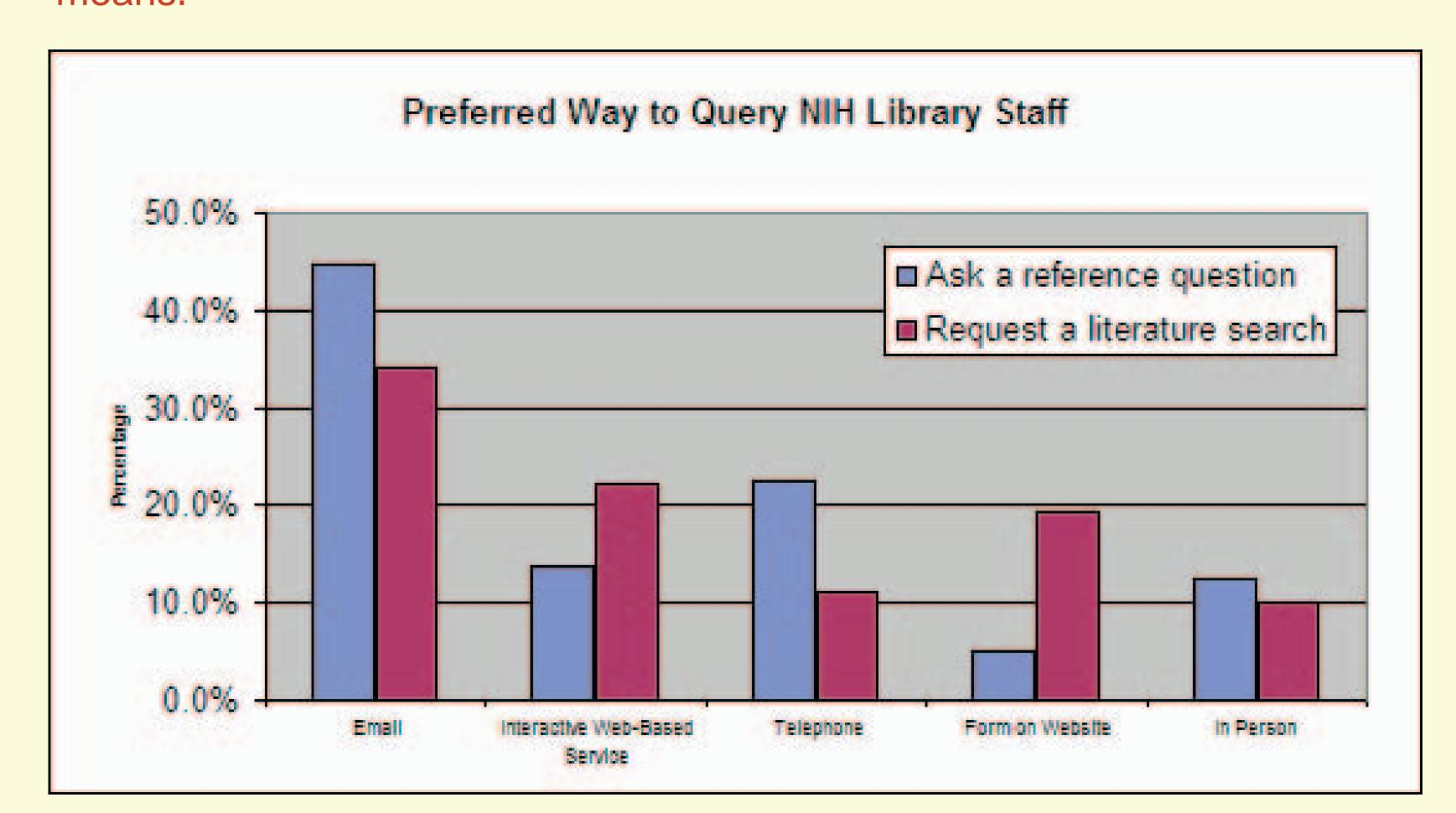
During the four years that the service was in use, the number of questions received rose from an average of 40/month in 2002 to an average of 100/month in 2004 and then declined slightly in 2005. During the same period, questions received at the information desk also declined in 2005, but still remained about 9 times as high as those received by virtual reference.



User satisfaction surveys of the virtual reference service revealed that customers were satisfied with the service (average rating 4.4 out of 5).



However, a user needs survey conducted in 2005 revealed that customers preferred to ask questions (44.5%) and request literature searches (34.2%) via email rather than other means.



Finally

- Technological problems caused customers to be dropped by the service for no apparent reason
- Delays in a customer being picked up, in cases where the librarian on duty was already responding to a customer, may have discouraged customers, and
- A planned change in the vendor's software that would inhibit the ability of the librarian and the customer to co-browse proprietary web pages would remove what had originally been one of the selling points of the software

Conclusions

Pros:

Customer satisfaction high

Cons:

- Cost 4 times as high
- Use relatively low
- Customers prefer e-mail
- Technical difficulties cause frustration

The service was dropped in December 2005

Discussion

- Reference questions, in general, are declining
- Customers are more self sufficient and are using the Internet and library resources independently
- Chat not as common among older users 72% of NIH staff are over 35 years old
- Limited service hours may have limited use of the service

A virtual reference service may be more successful if

- Operated during the evening and weekend hours when the reference staff are not normally available
- Used by several libraries that could share the cost of staffing the service, or
- Used by a more receptive population

Finally, the results of an environmental scan conducted in 2005 recommended that the Library put more effort into:

- Scholarly publishing
- Information architecture
- Marketing

By canceling the virtual reference service, staff time is freed to pursue new strategic objectives.

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